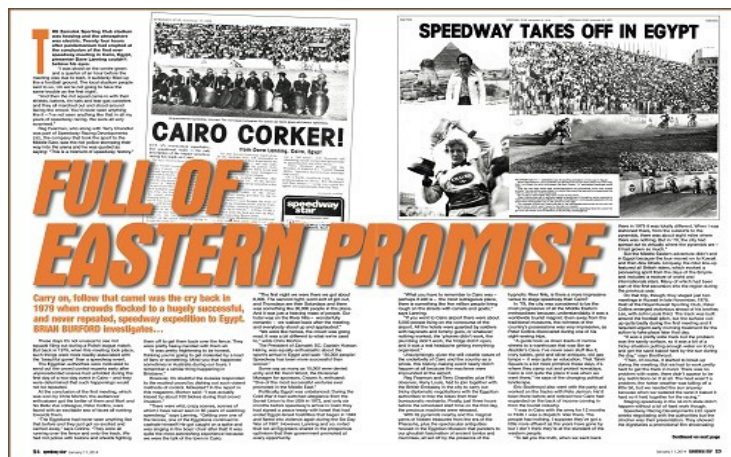


Speedway in Egypt

3.0 1979

3.1 - Cairo

(Speedway Star, 11.1.201)



THE Zamalek Sporting Club stadium was heaving and the atmosphere was electric. Twenty four hours after pandemonium had erupted at the conclusion of the first ever speedway meeting in Cairo, Egypt, presenter Dave Lanning couldn't believe his eyes.

"I was stood on the centre green and a quarter of an hour before the meeting was due to start, it suddenly filled up like a football ground. The local stadium people said to us, 'oh we're not going to have the same trouble as the first night'."

"And then the riot squad came in with their shields, batons, tin hats and tear gas canisters and they all marched out and stood around facing the crowd. You'd never seen anything like it - I've not seen anything like that in all my years of speedway racing. We were all very surprised."

Reg Fearman, who along with Terry Chandler was part of Speedway Racing Developments Ltd., the company that took the sport to the Middle East, saw the riot police stomping their way into the arena and he was quoted as saying: "This is a moment of speedway history."

Carry on, follow that camel was the cry back in 1979 when crowds flocked to a hugely successful, and never repeated, speedway expedition to Egypt. BRIAN BURFORD investigates...

These days it's not unusual to see riot squads filing out during a Polish league match. But back in 1979, when this meeting took place, such things were more readily associated with the 'beautiful game' than a speedway event.

The Egyptian authorities were motivated to send out the crowd control experts early after unprecedented scenes had unfolded during the first day of a two-day event in Cairo - and they were determined that such happenings would not be repeated.

At the conclusion of the first meeting, which was won by Chris Morton, the audiences' enthusiasm got the better of them and Mort and his Belle Vue colleague, Peter Collins, were faced with an excitable sea of faces all rushing towards them.

"The Egyptians had never seen anything like that before and they just got so excited and carried away," says Collins. "They were all running over the fence and onto the track. We had riot police with batons and shields fighting

them off to get them back over the fence. They were pretty heavy-handed with them all.

"It was pretty frightening to be honest, thinking you're going to get molested by a load of fans or something. Mind you that happened sometimes in Australia during our tours. I remember a similar thing happening in Brisbane."

However, it's doubtful the Aussies responded to the excited crowd by dishing out such violent methods of control. Molested? In the report in this magazine, Morton said: "I was actually kissed by about 100 blokes during that crowd invasion."

"There were wild, crazy scenes, scenes of which I have never seen in 60 years of watching speedway," says Lanning. "Getting over one of the fences, one of the Egyptians contrived to castrate himself! He got caught on a spike and was singing in the boys' choir after that! It was quite the most astonishing experience because we were the talk of the town in Cairo."

SPEEDWAY STAR, November 17, 1979



Unprecedented speedway scenes! The riot squad prepared for action as Cairo goes wild about speedway.

CAIRO CORKER!

IT'S AN overworked superlative, but sensational really is the only description of the impact...

from Dave Lanning, Cairo, Egypt

"The first night we were there we got about 8,000. The second night, word sort of got out, and Thursdays are their Saturdays and there was something like 30,000 people in the place. And it was just a heaving mass of people. Our hotel was on the River Nile - wonderfully romantic - we walked back after the meeting and everybody stood up and applauded."

"We were like heroes, the crowd was going mad. It was a bit different to what we're used to," adds Chris Morton.

The President of Zamalek SC, Captain Hussan Helmy, was equally enthusiastic about the sport's arrival in Egypt and said: "30,000 people! Speedway has been more successful than soccer."

Some say as many as 10,000 were denied entry and Mr. Henri Wood, the Divisional Manager for sponsors, Craven A, enthused: "One of the most successful ventures ever promoted in the Middle East."

Politically, Egypt was unbalanced. During the Cold War it had switched allegiance from the Soviet Union to the USA in 1972, and only six months before speedway's arrival in Cairo they had signed a peace treaty with Israel that had ended Egypt-Israeli hostilities that began in 1948 and flared into violence again during the Six Day War of 1967. However, Lanning and co. noted that not all Egyptians shared in the prosperous optimism that their government promoted at every opportunity.

PROMISE

"What you have to remember is Cairo was – perhaps it still is – the most outrageous place, there is something like five million people living rough on the streets with camels and goats," says Lanning.

"If you went to Cairo airport there were about 5,000 people living on the concourse of the airport. All the hotels were guarded by soldiers with bayonets and tommy guns, or whatever; nothing worked, the 'phones didn't work, the plumbing didn't work, the fridge didn't open, and it was a real headache getting everything organised."

Unsurprisingly, given the still volatile nature of the underbelly of Cairo and the country as a whole, this history-making event nearly didn't happen at all because the machines were impounded at the airport.

Reg Fearman and Terry Chandler, plus FIM observer, Harry Louis, had to join together with the British Embassy in the city to carry out tricky diplomatic negotiations with the Egyptian authorities to free the bikes from their bureaucratic restraints. Finally, just three hours before the scheduled start time on the first day, the precious machines were released.

With its pyramids nearby and the magical yarns of hidden treasures from the era of the Pharaohs, plus the spectacular antiquities housed in the Egyptian Museum that panders to our ghoulish fascination of ancient tombs and mummies, all set off by the presence of the

hypnotic River Nile, is there a more impressive venue to stage speedway than Cairo?

In '79, the city was considered to be the most progressive of all the Middle Eastern metropolises because, understandably, it was a worldwide tourist magnet. Even away from the traditional museums, the richness of the country's possessions was very impressive, as Peter Collins discovered during one of his sight-seeing trips.

"A guide took us down loads of narrow streets to a warehouse that was like an Aladdin's Cave. I've never seen stuff like it, ivory tables, gold and silver antiques, old gas lamps – it was quite an education. That Tahrir Square is a bit more primitive these days, it's where they camp out and protest nowadays. Cairo is not quite the place it was when we went there," he says of the changing political landscape.

Eric Boothroyd also went with the party and worked on the tracks with Pete Jarman. He'd been there before and noticed how Cairo had expanded on the back of income coming in from the tourist industry.

"I was in Cairo with the army for 12 months in 1946. I was a dispatch rider there. The people had nothing. I suppose they've got a little more affluent as the years have gone by but I don't think they're at the standard of the western people.

"To tell you the truth, when we went back

there in 1979 it was totally different. When I was stationed there, from the outskirts to the pyramids, there was about eight miles where there was nothing. But in '79, the city had spread out to virtually where the pyramids are – it had grown so much."

But the Middle Eastern adventure didn't end in Egypt because the tour moved on to Kuwait and then Abu Dhabi. Uniquely, the rider line-up featured all British riders, which evoked a pioneering spirit from the days of the Empire and included a mixture of world and international stars. Many of which had been part of the first excursion into the region during the previous year.

On that trip, though, they staged just two meetings in Kuwait in late November, 1978. Held at the Royal Kuwait Sporting Club, Peter Collins emerged victorious ahead of his brother, Les, with John Louis third. The track was built around the football pitch, but the surface cut-up quite badly during the first meeting and it required urgent early morning treatment for the action to take place later that day.

"It was a pretty wide track but the problem was the sandy surface, so it was a bit of a tricky situation putting enough water on to try and get the sand baked hard by the sun during the day," says Boothroyd.

"Then, of course, it started to break up during the meeting. But we had to work pretty hard to get the track in hand. There was no problem with water, there didn't appear to be any restrictions on it at all. The heat wasn't a problem, the hotter weather was tailing off a little bit, but we needed the sun anyway because when we watered the sand it baked it hard so it held together for the racing."

Staging speedway in the oil-rich state didn't happen without a lot of hard work though.

Speedway Racing Developments Ltd. spent weeks negotiating with the authorities but the clincher was their presentation. They showed the dignitaries a promotional film showcasing

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Craven 'A' Middle East Tour 1979

Cairo Wed. Nov. 7th : Cairo Championship.

Chris Morton 11, Peter Collins 11, Jim Mcmillan 11, Dave Morton 10, Phil Collins 10, Joe Owen 9, Dave Jessup 9, Les Collins 9, Bernie Leigh 9, John Davis 6, Barry Thomas 4, Richard Greer 4, Craig Pendleberry 3, Ian Cartwright 3, Reg Wilson 2, Neil Middleditch 2.

Cairo Thurs. Nov. 8th : Rd.1 'Middle East Masters'.

Chris Morton 14, Phil Collins 13, Dave Morton 13, Bernie Leigh 11, Jim Mcmillan 11, Joe Owen 10, Richard Greer 9, Peter Collins 8, Dave Jessup 6, Les Collins 6, John Davis 5, Reg Wilson 5, Ian Cartwright 3, Barry Thomas 3, Craig Pendleberry 3, Neil Middleditch 1.

Overall winner of the 3-round '**Middle East Masters**' was Chris Morton, 42pts; Dave Morton was 2nd, 39pts, and Phil Collins 3rd, 37pts.

(Rd.2 held at Kuwait City, Rd.3 at Abu Dhabi. Second race meetings were also staged at these 2 venues, won by Peter Collins and Reg Wilson respectively.)